



NATIVE INSTRUMENTS KOMplete 7

This VST instrument offers a wealth of instruments and effects that should keep you satisfied for years to come..

Text: Graeme Hague

▶ The English language can be a confusing beast, particularly when you don't spell it properly. Take for example Native Instrument's 'Komplete' 7, a bundle of instruments and plug-ins. What exactly does the company mean by calling it complete... sorry, 'Komplete'? Is it claiming that it's all you'll ever need in your studio – the complete package? Or does it simply mean that when you buy Komplete 7 it practically cleans out the store at NI?

Dunno, but if you have a host DAW that offers reasonable channel strip plug-ins, Komplete 7 is such a large and diverse range of applications it's possible you won't need anything else for about 10 years. It'll take you that long to figure out Reaktor 5.5 alone. As for diversity, you couldn't get more poles apart than 'The Finger' electronica plug-in compared to the fully-sampled Viennese Grand Piano.

WHAT IS IT?

Komplete 7 is a suite of NI software comprising 23 different products, plus a few utilities like Kore Player 2 and Controller Editor. Of these, seven are big-ticket items that can operate as standalone instruments, like Kontakt and Battery 3, while the rest are add-ons that either function

inside Kore Player 2, or require these seven acting as host. So for example, the aforementioned Viennese Grand Piano has to be run inside Kontakt, and the fabulous Reflektor convolution reverb is a Guitar Rig effect, and so on.

Some of the seven host applications have been around awhile and I don't want to go over old ground for too long, so let's get them out the way first shall we. Despite Native Instruments displaying a blatant disrespect for certain consonants, I'll begin alphabetically:

ABSINTH

Which brings us straight to arguably NI's most influential virtual instrument, Absynth, now at version 5. I doubt there's been a spooky television or film musical score that hasn't used an Absynth sound since around the late '90s. Although there are plenty of core (sorry, Kore) samples like piano, bass and other real instruments behind many of the Absynth patches, it specialises in atmospheric, evolving kinds of sounds that often aren't really playable with a melody, but are musical nonetheless. New features in Absynth 5 include additional filters: the new Aetheriser effect and a Mutator, which are supposed to provide simpler ways of altering the

sounds without needing to really understand the synth engine under the bonnet. I'm sorry to tell you, you're *still* going to have to experiment a lot and read the manual before you'll get your head around these gadgets. With a huge library of 1800 presets chances are you're not going to dabble too much anyway. You'll probably keep surfing for something better from the lists. The names of the presets sometimes provide a clue to what they'll do, like "Distorted Piano" while others will make you shrug and think, 'okay, I just do not get that'. Some were obviously chosen by hurling a copy of Lord of the Rings across the room and seeing what page fell open. The browser filter, which is common to several NI synthesiser instruments, works well though. Learn how to use it and you won't spend an inordinate amount of time searching for the right patch. A really interesting trick is that Absynth can be used as an audio effect across any DAW channel. A lot of the patches are effects in their own right and worth layering on a vocal, for example, to create something really different.

BATTERY 3

Battery 3 was released in 2006 and has been graced with a few significant updates since, but is still basically the same drum sampler. Five years is a long time between makeovers in the software world which suggests that either NI doesn't particularly care about its development or that it has tremendous faith in the product's longevity – I'd say it's the latter. I reviewed Battery 3 when it came out and I still reckon it's *the* programmer's drum sampler. The sounds are great, the kits diverse and the level of manipulating each drum sample can be as complex as you want – but Battery 3 won't play or mix drums for you. That's up to you.

FM8

FM8 emulates the classic FM synthesiser keyboards of the '80s and '90s, then adds a big lump of 21st century tweaking to give you a choice of both vintage and modern sounds. Use the browser to filter out everything except synths and pads, and the resulting presets displayed have got Jefferson Airplane's entire back catalogue figured out. The patches have a lot of variety and are almost all very playable as an instrument. FM8's arpeggiator is well executed and takes a lot of grief out of creating rhythms. Really, I reckon FM8 is the first go-to virtual keys instrument in the Komplete 7 suite for dialing up a quick, usable patch.

GUITAR RIG 4

Guitar Rig 4 copped a fair amount of stick from the GR faithful when it was released in late 2009. NI had bitten the bullet and done a lot of revamping which included some big departures from GR3 features, in particular the snapshot facility. New amplifier models and a control room module seemed to be ignored in preference to whining about the dropped GR3 stuff. Regardless of the negative comments you'll

find on forums, Guitar Rig 4 offers a wide range of high quality amplifier and effects sounds. Whether or not the patches are authentic replicas of the equipment they're supposed to represent has become a moot point as all plug-ins like GR build reputations based on their own merits, with the module descriptions becoming a guide rather than a promise. From screaming metal lead breaks to twanging country rhythm, GR4 has got them covered.

KONTAKT

Kontakt, like Absynth, made a big impression when it first arrived on the scene and subsequent versions have carried on the good name. Kontakt is so versatile that you'd be forgiven for asking why you need anything else, but when you use it in conjunction with other NI software you can see more clearly Kontakt's place in the synth hierarchy. It caters for the genuine, natural samples like orchestra, pianos and acoustic instruments. A new Choir library provides very good male and female vocals, plus extra instruments add up to another 10GB of samples for a total of 43GB (Komplete 7 is 90GB altogether). If it needs to be real, you'll be reaching for Kontakt.

MASSIVE

Conversely, Massive is a synthesiser that specialises in speaker-shredding *phat* sounds, sub-bass tones that will shift full pints of beer across the bar and aggressive, in-your-face lead tones. It's an acquired taste that mostly suits serious dance club styles of music – but not necessarily, of course. Massive is the go-to synth for practioners of genres demanding extreme LFO filter gymnastics such as DubStep and Crunk, thanks to Massive's flexible modulation matrix and Performer step envelope facilities.

“

Some [preset names] were obviously chosen by hurling a copy of *Lord of the Rings* across the room and seeing what page fell open

”

A nice convolution reverb, Reflektor nestles inside Guitar Rig 4 as a plug-in, but is definitely *not* just for guitar patches. Talking of which, see Rammfire below it – serious, neighbour-annoying grunge.





Abbey Road '60s Drum kit inside Kontakt: Great-sounding and well laid out drum sampler, plus a pretty-picture-type of GUI, if the nuts and bolts style of Battery 3 doesn't appeal.

NEED TO KNOW



Price
\$799

Contact

CMI
(03) 9315 2244
info@cmi.com.au
www.cmi.com.au

Pros

A wealth of instruments and effects that should keep you satisfied for quite some time.

Cons

Full install requires 90GB of HD space. Even these days, that needs some planning.

Summary

Although there's bound to be someone out there with a list of reasons why *Komplete 7* isn't complete, this is one hell of a VST instrument collection. It's a lot to take in and you'll need time to appreciate all that it has to offer, but once it's all installed and happy, and inside a good DAW, you'll have everything you need plus a few things you probably don't.

Devotees of these kinds of massive sounds will no doubt, find something unique and exciting in *Massive*. Meanwhile, a lot of *Komplete 7* users who don't care for techno may wind up leaving *Massive* on the virtual shelf.

REAKTOR 5.5

Reaktor 5.5 isn't an instrument – it's a 'modular studio'. Offering a huge amount of sounds and textures, it has 70 of its own internal synthesisers, sound generators and effects that can be combined into a limitless number of patches. *Reaktor's* GUI has also been substantially overhauled, providing for more intuitive operation, and now features a brand new synthesis facilities offered by the Modal oscillator block. This brings Additive synthesis capabilities to *Reaktor*, which lends itself well to creating physically modelled instruments. The Modal block makes possible the new synths ('Ensembles' in *Reaktor*-speak) included for *Komplete 7*: Laser Bass, *Reaktor Spark* and *Reaktor Prism*. Overall, the emphasis is strongly on synth-type sounds with rhythmic grooves and the ability to create precise patches. Not surprisingly, for those wishing to build their own synth and effect ensembles from scratch, the learning curve is steep, and it may take a while for you to confidently find a place for *Reaktor* in your studio. I'd expect a lot of *Komplete 7* purchasers will also put *Reaktor* to one side for a rainy day (unless they specifically wanted *Reaktor* and consider the rest of *Komplete 7* the bonus), but this is to ignore its versatility. With the 70 included factory Ensembles in addition to the 2800-strong library available for download, *Reaktor* is the gift that keeps giving.

Now we can start looking at the extra plug-ins and effects that come with *Komplete 7*.

MORE COMPLETE THAN EVER

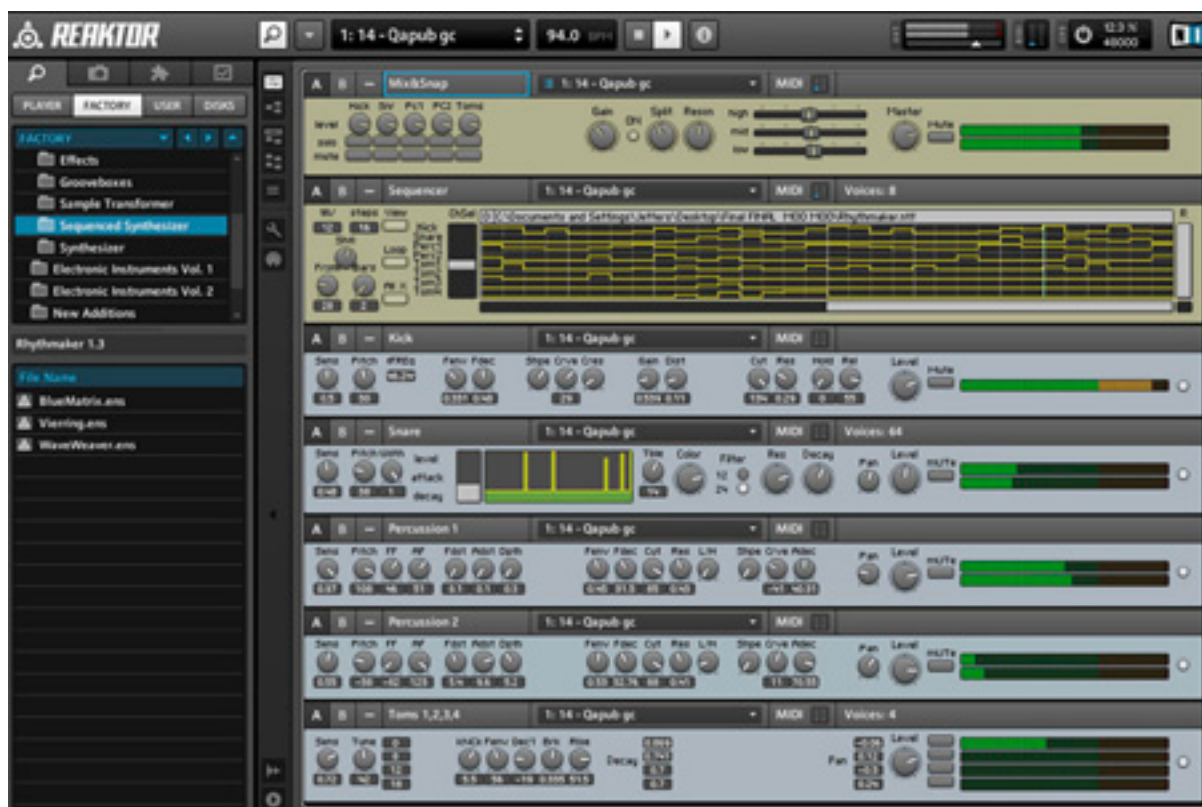
I used to work with a piano tuner, a kindly old Austrian gentleman called Adolph – unfortunate for a chap of his generation and geographical roots. Adolph could chat for hours about famous pianos he'd tuned and how the only

other professional tuner in town wouldn't know his A-sharps from his B-flats. Adolph was always talking about the subtle tones and performance characteristics of individual pianos, something I couldn't really appreciate. If you're like me, you'll struggle to get too excited over the four different pianos included in *Komplete 7*. The Upright Collection can have obvious applications, but otherwise the Vienna, Berlin and New York Grand Piano packages offer distinctions that only dedicated enthusiasts will care much about. It's hard to imagine someone leaping outraged to their feet after hearing a studio mixdown and yelling, 'You fool! You used the Berlin Grand, when it should have been the New York!' Still, people have been outraged by less.

The grand piano add-ons run inside *Kontakt 4*, as do several *Komplete 7* components, some of which cater for exacting musical tastes. The Scarbee Clavinet/Pianet is a pair of classic 'electro-phonetic' and 'electro-mechanical' (respectively) keyboard instruments used in the late 1960s. I'm all for being sentimental, but if you're not trying to recreate exactly that music, chances are these won't get a lot of track time. More useful, *Vintage Organs* has a choice of three Hammond organs – surprise surprise – a Vox Continental and a Farfisa Compact... we might have to take NI's word for it that these last two are classic instruments and not just dragged out of the basement and dusted off for the sake of it.

Also from Scarbee, the Mark I and A-200 Electric Pianos add-ons are instruments that should certainly make it into your DAW's VST Favourites menu. There are always occasions when an electric piano is the only piano patch that will cut through a mix and both these instruments not only sound great, they truly have that classic tone. A lot of sample-based virtual instruments will offer some kind of electric piano and even come close, but these two instantly make the grade.

Finally from Scarbee, the MM Bass gets a guernsey in



Reaktor 5.5: A modular studio, not just a plug-in. Bring your pilot's license.

Komplete 7. A bit like MIDI guitar tracks, bass playing simulators are usually treated with much distrust unless you're after that extremely annoying, Seinfeld sound. But the MM Bass really pulls it off, albeit in a '70s funk and disco style that might not lend itself to more modern genres. It's kind of alarming really – being a bass player myself – how well MM Bass comes across. Now I know how drummers feel...

Standing alone as the only add-on that uses just the Kore 2 player, Acoustic Refractions (yes, with a 'c') has a sample base of everyday sounds like washing machines, car doors shutting, alarm bells... you get the idea. AR twists these into musical notes to be played as an instrument and the effect is quite clever, if a little bizarre. NI mentions the term 'sound design' in the blurb, which pretty much sums it up.

Back we go to Reaktor 5.5, since the next three add-ons work inside it. Just when you're starting to overload on beeping, ringing, pad-like sweeping piano synthesiser sounds Reaktor Prism and Reaktor Spark provide different textures yet again. Could you achieve these in Absynth or FM8? Maybe, or at least you'll come close, but herein lays one aspect of Komplete 7 where some duplication in the actual sounds is unavoidable, despite which synth is responsible. These would be useful add-ons, if you *only* owned Reaktor.

GIVEN THE FINGER

Next, you have The Finger. Yes, it's complicated... and simple at the same time. The Finger allows you to stack and layer complex combinations of 'performance effects' across your MIDI keyboard, and is aimed at DJ performers. For instance, you could trigger four samples to play together and your next key-press tells them to keep looping. A huge, layered dance sound can be built... but I'm guessing if you buy Komplete 7 for those three grand piano samplers, you just lost interest in this review.

While we're cutting a swathe across the dance floor, Traktor's 12 is included in Komplete 7. These are 12 of the best crushing, slicing, mashing effects from Traktor Pro, but whereas Pro is designed as live performance DJ software, Traktor's 12 is for bringing those effects into a DAW environment. Again, if you're not a fan of techno then Traktor's 12 might not get a run, but there's no reason why it can't be applied to other genres. To do this, Traktor 12 needs to work inside an instance of Guitar Rig 4.

It's not the only one.

Rammfire is a new guitar amplifier simulator based on the personal setup of the impressively named Richard Z Kruspe of the band Rammstein, who apparently make Metallica sound like Air Supply having a nap. Usually, in my never-so-humble opinion, a lot of amp sims get worse the heavier they are, sounding more like a computer ripping zero's and ones apart than overdriven valves and circuits trying to destroy a speaker cone. But Rammfire is an exception. Somewhat miraculously the quality of distortion in this simulator stays realistic. If you've ever thought the metal content in GR4 lacking, check out Rammstein.

Also residing inside GR4 is Reflektor, the first convolution reverb boasting a 'zero latency' algorithm. A lot of us use convolution reverbs, and many of us only have a rough idea how they work, without really grasping what's going on. What many of us do know is that many of them sounds great, and aside from it being slightly perplexing to require GR4 – a guitar amp simulator – to host a reverb, Reflektor is excellent. The interface is simple – that's a good thing – you get a good sense of what you're doing and I was particular pleased with the drum room settings over my Battery 3 outputs.

Lastly – and talking of drums – Komplete 7 also has the Abbey Road '60s Drums collection for Kontakt. A quick story here – The Beatles were asked at a packed press conference if Ringo Starr was the best drummer in the world. Lennon quipped back, "He's not even the best drummer in the room." Mention Abbey Road and drums in the same sentence and you'll instantly think of The Beatles, Ringo Starr and despite their notoriety – why would you want them? Fear not and forget Ringo, this is two '60s drum kits meticulously sampled in Abbey Road and the scope of that sampling, plus the way it's presented inside the Kontakt GUI, make this a really cool instrument. Variations on how the kit pieces are hit (off-centre, centre, etc) maybe aren't so innovative, but the on-screen display greatly helps in programming diverse strikes that add realism. The kits overall aren't stuck in the '60s either. The only slight snag was the 400MB+ of RAM the kits swallow.

Phew, that's it. All 23 different – and maybe not-so-different – components to Komplete 7. Is it complete? Will you need anything else? Well, some people are never satisfied, but Komplete isn't a bad start. I know it'll be a while before I start looking for other VST instruments. ■